

What if this is all the love I ever know? by orphan_account

Series: [mileven and friends](#) [4]

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: F/M, Fluff, Friendship, Implied/Referenced Rape/Non-con, Past Rape/Non-con

Language: English

Characters: Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven | Jane Hopper & Jim "Chief" Hopper, Eleven | Jane Hopper & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler, Joyce Byers & Eleven | Jane Hopper, Will Byers & Eleven | Jane & Dustin Henderson & Maxine Mayfield & Lucas Sinclair & Mike Wheeler, Will Byers & Eleven | Jane Hopper

Status: Completed

Published: 2021-02-28

Updated: 2021-02-28

Packaged: 2022-04-01 18:07:19

Rating: Not Rated

Warnings: Rape/Non-Con

Chapters: 1

Words: 5,646

Publisher: [archiveofourown.org](#)

Summary:

“Today we’re talking about experiments, they type Dr Brenner had you do,” he says gently. El doesn’t think gentle suits Dr Sam Owens, but she doesn’t say that out loud.

“Papa?” A look of surprise comes over her face. He’d not been mentioned yet in their meetings.

“Yes, you can call him that if you like.” El makes a face. She doesn’t like to call him anything, doesn’t want to talk about him.

Dr Owens brings over a board; it has a human body drawn on it like the one on the front of her biology textbook, and he hands her a

marker.

“Can you dot on the board where they experimented on you, Miss Hopper?”

Or, an au where Brenner was somehow even more evil and El has to work through the trauma

What if this is all the love I ever know?

Author's Note:

Wow. Okay so I wrote this a year ago and never got around to posting it! Tysm to [TakThisWaltz](#) for being my beta! (my first ever one too <3

I tried to add you as a co-creator and it wouldn't let me! If it ever gets fixed I'll add you asap <3

I know this contains some hard topics, so please read the tags and stay safe!

“Hello, Miss Hopper,” Dr Owens smiled down at her as he entered the room.

“Hi,” she responded lightly, a small, awkward smile on her face. The one she always wore when she had to come in to talk to him.

“Today we’re talking about experiments, they type Dr Brenner had you do,” he says gently. El doesn’t think gentle suits Dr Sam Owens, but she doesn’t say that out loud.

“Papa?” A look of surprise comes over her face. He’d not been mentioned yet in their meetings.

“Yes, you can call him that if you like.” El makes a face. She doesn’t like to call him anything, doesn’t want to talk about him.

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“Can you dot on the board where they experimented on you, Miss Hopper?”

The party was worried about El.

It was no secret that she had been through a lot, they all had. But if

anyone knew El they knew that she loved learning new words, old words, using words, anything that reminded her that she wasn't still Eleven, 011, experiment. So when she began responding very simply, the party knew she was struggling badly.

Will would sneak into her room at night if she was sobbing and cuddle with her until she slept, but she didn't say anything, simply squeezing his hand in thanks.

Jonathan would join sometimes too, offering the same comfort that she got when he made her breakfast, or made her a new playlist tape. So she'd become squished in between the two Byer boys, like if they held her tight enough they could help her forget what was troubling her.

Max would take her shopping, and try and show her comics but El wouldn't laugh like she normally did, only smooth down the new clothes and scrunchies, over and over again; as if she couldn't believe she had them. Her hands would dance across the coloured pages of the comics in wonder and longing, as if she wanted to be there rather than real life. Max still read them to her anyway.

Lucas would sometimes leave the room, and Mike understood why. One of the reasons the two teens clashed so often was their strong overprotective nature, cursed with feeling and thinking too much. Mike knew seeing El like that got Lucas' mind whirling into chaos, the same way it drove Mike to throw rocks at trees and his hands through walls.

Dustin tried to use his comedy, trying to get her back to the present with her favourite movies and shows. Their usual weekly tv session was abnormally still and quiet. He missed her laugh when he growled and showed off his teeth.

Nancy tried, and although El seemed slightly cheerier when she handed her some new clothes, full of frills and colour and excitement, El wouldn't talk. Nancy did her best in with the way that an older sister could, but even her intuition couldn't get her to say the right thing.

Steve had always tried to make it look like he didn't care, especially

about the little shits that somehow wriggled their way into his life and annoyed him every day. Steve knew he actually loved them all a lot, and that they'd taught him love he hadn't known before.

El especially, had taught him the love of an older brother, and the amount of times Steve had messed up his hair from worrying his hand through it proved just how much he loved her. He's Steve the hair Harrington, and he's willingly looking like a mess over a recently turned teen. The surge of overprotective-ness he feels when El doesn't leap into his arms as he enters the cabin to tutor her doesn't leave, it just sticks, like peanut butter to the roof of his mouth. Steve knows it won't leave until she feels better. The price he's payed for feelings.

El was also getting a hand from Steve's new friend Robin. El thought she was so cool. She wore her hair in a way that looked effortless but she didn't even care and she wore fun outfits with so much colour that she let El borrow. Robin brought her games and cool videos and told funny stories to take her mind off things, but El wouldn't react..

Mike was suffering the most; he always worried about El, but it was magnified whenever she became like this.

He hated that she was hurting. El of all people didn't deserve it. Mike wanted to rip out his hair, scream, slam his fists down; whatever it took to get his point across that El Hopper was a kind, lovely, intelligent girl who didn't deserve any of it. But no one could undo what had already happened.

He couldn't change it, he couldn't fix it.

Mike felt stuck and helpless, but he knew that he'd still be equally helpless even if he knew what was wrong. Because this wasn't like a Demogorgon, they couldn't kill it with a wrist rocket and get rid of it, it was always in her head, shown on her body in scars and marks that Mike would kiss in a desperate attempt to keep it all away.

It worked until it couldn't.

Will found out first, completely by accident. It was 3am and he needed a drink, the worrying about his friend starting to affect his sleeping pattern (not that he really had one anyway).

He was moving though the hall silently, knowing Jonathan had been at work late, and he didn't want to disturb him. It was only as he reached the kitchen, he realised Joyce and Hopper were still up and taking, quite passionately, over something.

"I just can't deal with it Joyce. He defiled her...my daughter--"

Defiled.

Will knew that word. He'd seen that used in one of the terrible dramas that came on when all his favourite shows had stopped. One character was usually screaming at another, anger flying around them, but he'd never seen it used in a way that tugged his heart into his throat. Before he could consider moving away and leaving the conversation that wasn't meant for his ears, Hopper continued.

"Ten years old. It began when she was ten Joyce! That's two years of those bastards touching her in ways she shouldn't even be thinking about!" his voice was cut off by a gruff sob sound. Will had never heard Hopper cry before and it was jarring to listen to.

He tiptoed his way back to his room as fast as possible; his want for water completely forgotten with the new found information. Will sat himself on the bed, covers ruffled and askew from his broken sleep. The colors of the room were seemingly darker than before, the outline of his walls pulsing in the shadows. He remembered when his mom had put him down into the exact same seat and had a talk with him. The talk. She didn't do everything with him, just the basics. Wanting to do it before the school did. Enough for Will to understand exactly what Hopper was talking about.

Everything that he'd heard finally caught up to him and Will ran for the bathroom, just managing to make it before throwing up into the toilet. The bile burned his throat but it felt like it was attacking his heart at the same time, beating so hard against his rib cage he's surprised they could contain it.

He heard gentle footsteps behind him and knew it was El as soon as small hands started soothing his back. If anything that made him feel worse because now she was comforting him, after going through absolute hell.

She used to do this a lot, still did sometimes. He had very intense reactions to nightmares and El would hang out with him until he felt better but Will wasn't sure what she could do this time. He wasn't sure how he could possibly feel okay with any of this because now she was comforting him and it shouldn't be this way around, but she doesn't even know that he knows yet. She doesn't know that one more thing she couldn't control just changed her life around again.

He turned around, knees cold against the tiled floor through his thin pyjama pants, eyes watery as they matched the tiles shine against the harsh light above them.

"El-" his voice was thick with emotion and he could feel it.

"Will, it's okay. Safe," she soothed, hands continuing in a rubbing motion.

"El I- I know about- I heard Hopper- I didn't mean- El, I'm so sorry." he couldn't finish one sentence before trying to start another, too many points to make and too many things to say. Nothing was enough. El was confused, which made it all more worse for Will, who didn't want to speak the words he knew would make her understand, like they were cursed and as soon as he finished speaking the world would start rotting and dying.

"In the lab" he whispered. The loudest his voice would allow him to say the words. When her face started crumbling the way he knew it would, he felt like maybe it really was cursed.

The soothing circle pattern has stilled and El's eyes were becoming watery just like his. She shuffled back on her bare knees, desperate to get away, and Will winced at the friction of her skin against the tiles, creating red patches across her legs.

"I-I'm sorry" she choked out, now on the other side of the room with her back to the door. She'd slid from her knees to a seated position, legs tucked in, as if she could make herself disappear. She probably wanted to.

"El no. Don't be sorry" his voice was a whisper, not like anyone could hear him if he spoke louder, but he knew if he did something would

break, the atmosphere or El.

Monday started out as a normal school day (as normal as it could be considering the recent situation). The boys and El put their bikes in the racks, narrowly avoiding being yelled at by some of the older seniors that liked to make fun of them, and went to the AV room. It wasn't the same as Mr Clark's but it was a sanctuary for them (and it was always left unlocked during school hours).

Max, after being dropped off by Billy, was rocking her chair on its back legs in reckless fashion. Dustin was at the table checking his homework over with Will, while Lucas paced around throwing a tennis ball against the wall and trying to catch it in different poses. Mike was on the large beanbag sitting in the corner of the room with a still quiet El on his arm. They'd managed to sneak the beanbag in from a garage sale down on Maple street and no one has made them take it away yet.

"I'm telling you; he's got it in for me," Dustin groaned, having given up on the books and joined Lucas, Will and Max in a communal game of catch, throwing the tennis ball over arm and completely missing Lucas' open hands. This was the closest they got to physical activity outside sport lessons and riding bikes.

"He doesn't have it in for you, the homework is just hard" , Mike quipped, having given up on the tennis ball in favour of keeping his arm around El instead.

"I'm the best physicist in the room and you know it, he definitely has it in for me" Dustin fires back, finger pointed for added effect.

"Well, good news is, you won't have to suffer through it today" Max said in her usual sarcastic way, throwing the ball to the wrong end of the room, ending the game in what Lucas hoped was his win.

"Whadya mean?" Dustin asked. At least, that's what was deduced by the rest of the party, as the unintelligible words were trapped in his mouth by overly ambitious bites of apple.

"I mean, Davis has to switch us around for the stupid shitty seniors today. So, Chapman swapped periods."

Everyone groaned. Sheens was the worst teacher in the entire school. She taught biology to mainly the older kids, and she was so mean and strict. People say that one time she gave a boy a week's worth of detention for bringing the wrong pencil, but Will had heard that from Billy, and he also prided himself in being the only kid in Hawkins to have witnessed an alien visit, so maybe it wasn't the most trustworthy source.

"What's the point of switching around physics and biology anyways. Stupid seniors," muttered Mike, who had always had a bias for the more mathematical subject anyway.

Before anyone could ask, the bell sounded out and everyone had to make their way to their respective home rooms. But it wasn't long before the dreaded biology class, as it was rescheduled for first period.

The classroom was exactly like Sheens. Cold, overbearing and had a hint of despair. The only positive was that they were all sat reasonably close together.

She entered briskly (surprisingly not by witches' broom) and began scratching at the board with the chalk. The sound would normally make El cringe, but she couldn't bring herself to react when her head was so busy with the lab, and papa and everything that had happened in her life. However, when Sheens turned away to pick up the register it was clear to see what she had written on the board, and El could feel her heart beating into her skull, shaking up her entire body.

"Sex education, your body, your mind-" her voice annunciated every word perfectly and El could have gagged on the spot.

She could feel eyes burning into the back of her head and knew it was Will. She didn't want to turn around and see the look on his face. The one she put there.

"This is an important class and there will be a test at the end, so

make sure to pay attention, and if you even think about being funny I will send you straight to the principle to explain the comedy of your joke in front of your parents,” she spoke with a no-nonsense tone, and El would have laughed at the scared expression that now resided on the face of Troy and his goons, but the words on the board were screaming at her and she couldn’t get them to shut up.

‘Where did he touch you Eleven?’

El could feel eyes burning the right side of her face and knew that was where Will sat, could feel his concern radiating and twisting her stomach over even more.

“First things first, Melissa is currently handing you all two sheets. One has the male body and one has the female, I’m sure you know which is which.”

‘Can you confirm this is where he touched you Miss Hopper?’

El really hated teacher humour sometimes, and suddenly she hated biology too. She hadn’t been able to look at the front of her textbook since the meeting and now was being forced to entertain the subject earlier than prepared for. Stupid seniors. Stupid Sheens. Stupid-

“Next!” The harsh voice of Sheens brought her away from her thoughts with a jump but El wasn’t sure which she’d rather have.

“Before you start learning about the physical, you have to learn the mental. Have you ever heard of the word consent?”

A bunch of people were either nodding or shaking their heads. El stayed completely still.

“Consent is agreeing to take part in the act of sexual intercourse itself. If there is no consent then that is called sexual assault or rape, depending on what happens at the time.” The sounds of her sharp words matched her sharp chalk against the blackboard, as Sheens started underlining key words and making tables. As if anything made enough sense for it to fit into a category.

‘That was called sexual assault Eleven’

"I'll refer you to page six of your helpful leaflets. I do not want to see any of these littering the school by the end of the day"

El's fingers were shaky, they couldn't grip the shiny plastic paper leaflet properly, only rifling through the pages in incorrect fashion. Words flashed by her eyes that brought memories with them.

'Minor'

'Consent'

'Assault'

El was drowning.

"You've been bad today Eleven"

She wasn't stupid, she knew there had to be a liquid of sorts to actually drown, but her lungs were filling up all the same.

"You've disobeyed me"

Filling up with hurt and panic and Papa.

"You're going to be very still"

She wondered if she'd always feel like she was drowning.

"And I'm going to hold you down"

When she closed her eyes, the darkness formed figures of him, his face made from the coloured blotches that appeared after staring at the lights for too long and suddenly she was drowning, drowning, drowning-

"Begin."

El got out of her chair and ran, glad the door had been left open due to the heat of the summer that hadn't left so she didn't have to fumble with the handle, hands still too shaky. She could hear the yells of protest and sounds of fast paced shoes which meant that the party was following her. She should stop to talk to them, let them in,

but it only spurred her on to get further away, they can't know what she did. What she is.

El passed reception, continued to the emergency doors up the hallway and continued until she was outside at the front of the school near some greenery.

Breathing in and out was becoming difficult but it felt slightly easier when it was the smell of grass and leaves instead of people and stationery. All the simple differences that helped remind her she wasn't in the lab anymore, at least physically.

Mentally she was still trapped there. None of her other senses were working, eyes so blurry with tears and ears so muffled all she could hear was the blood rushing around, taste blood from how harshly she bit her lip.

She fell to her knees, not caring for the banging sensation that reverberated through her legs as she gripped the ground hard.

'If there is no consent given . . .'

'Come be good for your papa Eleven'

'...Then it is considered sexual assault'

'Lights out. Machine on. Begin.'

So loud. So bright. Too bright. Too dark.

'Begin'

Now there were hands on her, lots of them. El didn't know if she wanted to hold on to them or push them away so she continued to grip the ground until a stinging sensation went through her fingers.

'You have a wound Eleven'

She knew she was sobbing, yelling, crying. Doing as much as she could through her troubled breathing.

'A terrible wound'

The world was too big. Too loud. Sometimes maybe she wanted the lab back for the simplicity. Before someone taught her that she was bad and abnormal. A freak show put in public.

‘And it’s festering’

She could only hope for everything to even out as unconsciousness took her away, falling from her knees onto her side, entire body going lax into the ground, just wanting to be swallowed up whole.

‘And eventually, it will kill you’

The party stood still around the Hopper-Byer residence (except Mike, who was pacing frantically) feeling so out of place in a usually bustling environment.

Hopper and Joyce went into the kitchen as soon as then returned to have a ‘private discussion’. It was only now the party was realising how frequent they were becoming.

The atmosphere was so different, no sounds of dice against boards or fading laughter or a new film starting up, no joyous smells of sweets and popcorn. It almost felt like that Autumn a year or so before, when they’d returned from the hospital, so similar that everyone could feel themselves turning to look at Will’s ‘Bob Newby Superhero’ poster, hearts remembering the loss that still felt so raw and recent.

There was a tension around everyone, an unwillingness to talk over the deafening silence. Everyone was confused, minds whirring about what actually happened just a few hours earlier. The only person who didn’t seem confused was Will, who’d closed himself off since they had managed to get El off the ground and into the car.

Mike thinks he’s going to add that image into his memory bank of things he’s never going to unsee, which he often feels is way too full for a 15-year-old kid.

The older teens were just beginning to process everything after all being picked up from their respective jobs or the upper school.

Steve was in his usual protective state, the lack of knowledge seemingly getting to him.

“I- is she sick? Is it the mind flayer? Cause I can burn that son of a bitch out any day.”

“Steve-” Robin tried to quell his fast talking.

“No, Robin, I mean it! I- I just need a new lighter”

Nancy and Jonathan were more silent contemplation than loud rambling, who had made sure their younger siblings were okay (Jonathan had tried to make sense of Joyce too but to no avail) before sitting in a corner and held hands in what they thought was a subtle way.

The usual fake gagging sound from Mike and Will didn’t happen this time. The couple decided they missed it. Preferred the mocking to the silence.

Lucas, Dustin and Max were in their own corner. The party feeling split with Will knowing more than he was saying and Mike putting friction burns in the carpet with the soles of his shoes.

Everything felt messed up.

Who knows how long they all waited. Just existing in each other’s company, before Hopper and Joyce finally came back.

Jonathan went to Joyce immediately, who was worrying her lip. Everyone else was just looking at Hopper, different emotions across everyone’s eyes but all looking in apprehension.

Mike was the quickest. His ever-anxious energy spreading now he didn’t just have to pace around.

“What. Did. They. Do?” Mike is almost eye to eye with the older man, practically growling, face hard and unforgiving, but Hopper can see the emotion coming through, the desperation in his eyes to want to help and the upmost concern in the way his right eyebrow is up higher than the left. The air was tense, hot and heavy. Like they’d wandered into a sauna and the door had been locked.

“It’s about them, right? The- the assholes at the lab?” He was still bouncing in position. Clearly on Hopper’s last nerve.

However, as Mike stared (almost eye to eye at the rate he was growing) at the older man he could see how defeated he was. In a way Mike has never seen him before.

“Please just tell me.” His voice was a mere whisper now, fist coming down from its clenched position.

Joyce eyed the way Hopper was struggling with his emotions and put a hand on his shoulder, coming forward.

“Honey there were some people at the lab who did terrible things to El. Things we can’t bear to imagine and-”

“We know that! We know they hurt her and locked her up and tortured her! Jesus, I mean, I’ll be thinking about it every day for the rest of my life!”

“This was different to that.” Joyce’s voice shook but her eyes were strong when they looked around the room, despite the tears still there.

“What kind of different?” Nancy was now approaching Mike, observing his breath getting faster.

There was another deathly quiet pause. Which Mike felt was becoming way too frequent, as he observed Hopper take in shaky breaths similar to his own, waiting for Joyce to speak.

“They touched her.”

The air felt wrong.

It felt heavy and thick.

‘W-what?’ Mike’s voice was barely a whisper, echoing in the quiet as a complete opposite to the tone he had a few moments earlier. He seemed to stumble and catch himself, stomach twisting and his worse fear coming true.

He'd had underlying fears of what the lab had done, nightmares of how far they'd taken it. But he'd always hoped-

And with the lesson they'd just had it was all slotting into place.

There was no way out now and Mike was choking, gasping, drowning-

Is this what she felt like?

His El. His lovely kind El. Had been pushed to her limit in every possible way.

All Mike could feel suddenly was hot anger. It dragged him down into his own head and threw him around, like the monster he'd feared from under his bed had reared its ugly head, reached out and crushed him. Crushed him until everything he could see was tinted in red, and his lungs were filled with overwhelming amounts of air from harsh breathing through gritted teeth that he knew would hurt his jaw the next day. He was starting to get used to the short, stabbing pain. Used to feeling injustice taint everything he loved.

He only just made it to the Byer's balcony in order to be sick somewhere that wasn't all over their carpet. Their house already destroyed by Demogorgons and two growing teen boys, Mike didn't want to add to the mess. The mess that seemed to keep growing and entangling everyone he cared about.

He felt a presence behind him and could tell by the gentle, calm movements that it was Will.

"I threw up when I found out too." It was a jarring statement to start with, sobering up Mike from his previous moment of serenity, but Will said it so delicately it softened the heartache that came with the words slightly.

"You didn't tell me. You didn't tell us." Mike's tone wasn't accusatory, merely pointing out facts, but it still sent a sting through the air, like it was fighting the peaceful aura that Will brought, angst against calm.

Rage split down the middle, illustrating a war of harsh jagged lines

against soft smooth curves. Mike wondered if he's always feel jagged on the inside sometimes. If hot anger would always invade him.

"What was I supposed to say, Mike? How would I even start that? And besides El, she- I couldn't do that to her." Will sighed, clearly torn apart by the whole situation too.

"I know. It doesn't make it any easier though" Mike matched Will's sigh as he wrung his hands, which Will had noticed he'd started doing when bouncing his leg up and down didn't satisfy his nervous energy.

"Are you-" Will paused for a moment, maybe slightly more hesitant. "Are you planning on going back inside?"

Mike pursed his lips in thought. "When I know that I don't have the urge to punch a wall and destroy your house more than it already has been the past few years," he joked as lightly as possible, turning to face the part of wall that has been previously struck by an axe and covered with tar-pooling.

Will just smiled, a soft knowing smile that he always had, and put his forearms on the handrail of the decking and leant on them.

"Then I guess I'll stay too."

The rest of the party were still standing, somber around the living room after Mike and Will ran out.

Everyone was off colour and had pallor to their cheeks as they tried to process the new information while Mike simultaneously had a meltdown. Or maybe they were all having a meltdown. It was getting hard to tell at this point.

Steve had shrunk shakily to the ground, his lighter idea clearly forgotten before getting up in a rush and running to Max and Lucas who he now realised had tears running down their faces.

"It's not fair." Max's voice broke on her final word as she cried into Steve's chest.

“I know,” he whispered, a hand rubbing up and down her back.

Jonathan looked haunted, similar to how he looked when Will had disappeared. His mind was too loud even from the outside. Similar to Robin, who was uncharacteristically quiet.

“How do we help? How can we?”

It was Nancy who broke the silence again after Max’s outburst. Voice still trembling.

“We be there for her. The way we always are.” Lucas spoke strongly despite the tears still falling.

Then the silence returned, as Steve continued to comfort Max gently.

Joyce had been checking on El every so often, usually just coming back with the shake of a head and rubbing her hand up and down her arm. This time was different.

She seemed lighter as she was walked through, like some weight had been taken off her shoulders. The rest could only guess what had happened.

“She’s awake. She’s asking for Mike. A lot.” There was a hint of humour in her voice as she spoke. A slight smile to her face.

Lucas left to tell Will and Mike and not even a few seconds had passed before Mike ran back inside full force and headed for El.

He lost his speed as he neared the door, suddenly apprehensive about how to approach the situation.

He raised his hand to the door and knocked, smiling softly as it opened via the use of her powers.

Mike’s first thought as he looked at her on the bed was that she was the prettiest girl he’d ever met.

Even as she sat in the bed with knots in her hair and Hopper’s old clothes, she looked absolutely perfect to him.

“Hey, El,” Mike murmured, softly moving forward towards the bed. Not rushing or frantic, but not completely halted. El liked that he wasn’t approaching her like she was a wild animal.

“Hi Mike,” she whispered back, her voice was equally soft, so soft, and Mike was almost taken over again by hot rage as he was reminded how many bad things had happened to such a gentle person.

It must have shown in his face, even if it was only for a second El picked up on it. She always did. Having been late to talking and interacting, she relied on studying people. Even if she didn’t have the words to describe what someone was feeling she felt it deep down, and that’s what mattered.

“You know.” She wasn’t asking, answer very obvious from the lack of rushed questions and the presence of apprehension.

“Yeah.” he breathed out, bouncing his right leg in place, wringing his hands, clearly trying not to rush forward and crowd her, wrestling with his want and his belief in what was actually right to do.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, Mike,” she continued in a hushed tone, hair falling in front of her face to intentionally hide from him.

It was at this point Mike jolted forward, not standing to be so far apart from her when she felt that way.

“No, El! You don’t need to be sorry. It’s your decision when you want to tell people this kind of stuff okay? Sure, I’m upset right now, but it’s not because of you alright? Never because of you El. I promise,” he murmured, eyes shining even in the dim lighting, staring straight into her view and hoping she believed him.

There was a pause. The quiet rippled around them.

“Can... can I touch you El?” He hesitantly asked, fingers twitching, clearly desperate to reach out. El’s heart burned that he cared enough to ask her, she’d never really been asked that before. She just nodded, wanting the same thing he did.

It was a rush of movement, he blurred into a mess of his colourful

striped jumper his mom had chosen that day and his dark hair as he wrapped himself around her. A human blanket.

They settled back against the headboard and Mike rocked them slightly, El wasn't sure if it was for her comfort or his natural fidgeting, but she loved it either way. She loved him.

They must have sat together for hours, just enjoying each other's company, because the next time they see someone else it's the rest of the party, being led by Steve and Robin.

"Hey, little Wheeler and little Hopper," he smiles softly, rustling his hair with his hand.

"We thought you'd enjoy some more company" explains Will, who smiles wider when El simply pats the bed as a response.

It's a bit of a squeeze but they all fit, with some room on the end for Jonathan and Nancy when they arrive, who according to Dustin is getting the absolutely necessary eggos.

"You can't have a group hang out without some awesome snacks! Friends 101," he explains to El, hitting the pillows repeatedly in a way that's supposed to make them more comfortable, but El isn't sure if it actually works.

She sits in the middle with Mike, slightly more on him than she's sure Hop would appreciate. Her friends around her on all sides as Nancy and Jonathan bring in eggos, and some cans of Coca Cola to go with it, which is apparently even better.

They joked and laughed and they played games and El could feel herself drifting further and further away from the darkness that had been following her for a very long time.

When she closed her eyes to sleep that night she didn't see papa or the bad men. The colored shapes didn't morph into bad memories of the lab or flash like warning signs. She just saw her friends, her family, the people that loved her. El finally felt safe.

Author's Note:

tysm for reading. Please comment and kudos if you liked it or had some feelings on it :)